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Break forth into the world! Be the presence of Jesus!

Thomas Gumbleton | Jun. 16, 2011 The Peace Pulpit

Over these past seven weeks, we have been celebrating what is contained in a hymn preserved for us in the Letter of Saint Paul to the Church at Philippi. It?s a hymn that probably was sung at the time of a person?s reception into the church.

They were admonished that your attitude should be the same as Jesus Christ had, and then the hymn:

> "Though He was in the form of God, He did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking on the nature of a servant, made in human likeness. He humbled Himself by being obedient to death, even death on the cross. That is why God exalted Him, giving Him the name that outshines all names, so that at the name of Jesus, all knees should bend in heaven, on earth, and among the dead, and all tongues proclaim that Christ Jesus is the Lord."

Pentecost Sunday
Acts 2:1-11
Psalm 104:1, 24, 29-30, 31, 34
1 Cor 12:3b-7, 12-13
Jn 20:19-23
Full text of the readings [1]

That beautiful hymn -- the death, the Resurrection, the exaltation of Jesus -- is what we have been celebrating for seven weeks and now we come to its culmination in what we call the Feast of Pentecost, the Feast of Weeks that was part of the Jewish celebration of their feast.

This sometimes is referred to as the birthday of the church, the moment when Jesus was now definitively gone and the community of His disciples had to begin their carrying on of the work of Jesus as in the Gospel, Jesus said, ?As God sent Me, I send you.?

Now is the moment but this moment begins with something truly extraordinary -- what happened on that first Pentecost Sunday -- and it?s important for us to try to get a sense.

The way that event of Pentecost is described in the Scriptures gives us a sense of the radical kind of change that the disciples were undergoing when the Holy Spirit descended. We call it the birthday of birth, but it?s more than that. It?s more radical, more profound. It?s a new creation. Something from nothing comes into being, a creation.

You get this sense of how new this is, how it?s radical. It?s making something from nothing like what happened at the beginning of the age, the beginning of time. When you listen to the descriptions, both in the Acts of the Apostles and in John?s Gospel, God is making something happen that is totally new, a new creation.

You get that first of all in the symbol of the fire when worlds were first created, when all of the universe came into being. Cosmologists describe the fire that is at the very center of our universe which burst forth some 15 billion years ago in a great, burning explosion of light. That?s what happened at the beginning of creation, and on this Pentecost Sunday, in the Acts of the Apostles, Luke uses symbolic language that evokes that same earth shattering or same extraordinary beginning, the fire that burst forth and brought about in this explosion of light the beginnings of our universe.

The fire comes upon the first disciples in Pentecost. Flames hover over them. It?s this new creation. It?s also made clear in the breathing that Jesus does in the Gospel. There?s only one place in Scripture that is at all comparable with this, where the writer in the Book of Genesis tried to describe how humankind was first created, and God breathed on that model of clay that had been formed. That clay then became alive.

Spirit of life burst forth and humankind is created. In our Scriptures, both in the Gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles, this spirit comes upon the first disciples -- on the whole Church gathered there in the upper room. It?s a breath, new life, new creation.

When we reflect on these images that are described for us in our readings today, I hope we begin to get a sense of how extraordinary this event is in the life of the world, in the life of the Church. The community of disciples of Jesus now becomes alive as a new creation filled with the Spirit of God, giving life, sending them forth with energy to proclaim the Good News to carry on the work of Jesus, being sent as He was sent.

When we put this event in the context in which it happened, we can begin to understand how important this event was for this early Church, for each of those disciples and as we enter into it and this event becomes part of our lives.

How important this is! We?re going to become a new creation, carrying out the work of Jesus, proclaiming the Good News. It is so important because we remember perhaps just a week ago when we celebrated the Feast of the Ascension of Jesus. The disciples had gathered as Jesus had ordered them through Mary, when he appeared to her on Easter morning.

He had told the disciples to go to Galilee where he would join them, and in Matthew?s Gospel, the joined Him in Galilee. Matthew tells us when they saw Jesus, they bowed before Him, although some doubted. They still weren?t clear, many of them, on who Jesus really is and also -- we know from the way they?re gathered there in the upper room -- they?re in fear.

They?re hiding. They haven?t really grasped the full meaning of the fact that Jesus passed through death to new life. So they need this outpouring of the Holy Spirit. They?re still not ready to go forward to be the community of disciples carrying out the work of Jesus. They?re in hiding.

They don?t really understand what Jesus is expecting of them because we have to remind ourselves that Jesus did not give them a blueprint for the Church. He did not design the way that they were to function when He was gone.

He only told them two things: I will not leave you orphans and I will be with you until the end of the world and I will send to you the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit will guide you into all the ways you are to go. Those two promises were very important for the early Church, and they are for us today as we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost.

In the early Church, what began to happen once they experienced this outpouring of the Holy Spirit is described by Luke in our first reading today, or is described by John in the Gospel when Jesus breathed on them and created something new, and sent them forth. As God has sent me, I send you.

Now on this Feast of Pentecost that we celebrate today, we celebrate what has happened with them. They began to break through the old barriers. You began to see it in the Acts of the Apostles early on after the persecution starts of the first community in Jerusalem.

They began to scatter. One of the disciples, Philip, goes into Galilee or into Samaria, the place where Jesus had

told the disciples they were not to preach while he was with them. Now they break down that barrier between Samaria and Judea, between the Jews and the Samaritans, and Philip is preaching.

Then John and Peter come and confirm what Philip is doing, bringing forth the Spirit on this new development in the Church. Later on in the tenth chapter of the Book of the Acts, Luke describes how Peter breaks through barriers of not going into the house of a Pagan.

He goes to Cornelius. He even shares a meal, something that Jews were not to do, and this community of disciples had been a Jewish community. Now they were breaking through that barrier. Suddenly, we?re told in the Acts of the Apostles, the people experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The whole house shook. The Spirit came on those people and Peter proclaimed God sends the Spirit even on the Gentiles. God is breaking forth through them into a new way of being present in the world.

So the first disciples began to break out of the barriers of fear that had held them in that upper room. They began to break out of the constraints of the law as Jesus had told them, ?You have heard it said of old, but I say to you,? that reject of the old law but fulfilling it. They began to spread the word among the Gentiles until a terrible crisis happened in the Church.

There were many who wanted to say you have to become a Jew before you can become a disciple of Jesus, and Paul and Barnabas, when they had gone out preaching, they did not impose the Jewish law on their converts, the Gentiles.

Many in the Church in Jerusalem were opposed to that. So they called together a meeting of the whole Church. They listened to one another and now they understand, ?No, we don?t have to be Jews first. Jewish religion continues but we are the disciples of Jesus.?

So now the Church, listening to the Holy Spirit, breaks forth even more and spreads among the Gentiles. In that early Church, you can see what was happening. They were open to the Spirit. They did become a new creation. They began to carry out the work of Jesus, going into the world, proclaiming the Good News, going forth as Jesus did to be the light to the world, to heal, to be food for the scattered children of God, to be the new temple, to be the divine presence, the culmination of that presence in human history.

They began to do all of this under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Now we who are gathered here today in this Church, we?re called and we can experience this outpouring of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Each of us as an individual open ourselves to the Spirit of Jesus being poured forth and our whole community of the Church, we must be open to this new coming of the Holy Spirit. There are some things that happen in the Church even today that show us that God is still present, God is still working when we listen to the Spirit.

Just recently I read a very extraordinary article in the *Tablet* magazine, a Catholic magazine published in London, England. It told the story of what happened in Czechoslovakia during that terrible period of time after the Soviet Union had overrun Eastern Europe and put many of these nations in Eastern Europe under the severe constraints of the Communist system.

The Church in Czechoslovakia was being destroyed. They could not function publically. So the Spirit acted within that Church and Bishop Felix Davidek began to respond to the Spirit. He began to organize the Church in very small communities which they called Koinotes.

That word is based on koinonia, which means community in Greek. So they had these small communities very much like the early Church, and they functioned scattered throughout Czechoslovakia. They needed leadership, so Bishop Davidek did something under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, I?m sure.

He began to ordain married men. He began to ordain women, first of all because he experienced that they were being called to be the leaders of these small communities, but also because in a very practical way, the Communist leadership would not expect married men to be the priests, the ordained leaders. They would not expect women to be the priests or the ordained leaders.

So this Church began to grow. These small communities began to grow and the Church survived this harsh repression that otherwise would have destroyed it.

Now is that not a movement of the Holy Spirit that Bishop Davidek responded to and that the Church in Czechoslovakia responded to? When we face our problems in the Church today, especially a lack of ordained leadership, isn?t it possible that we should be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit in our midst?

For most people in the Church, the movement of the Spirit indicates, ?Yes, our leadership could include married men or women as ordained ministers and leaders in our Church.?

Is it not possible that this is the Spirit speaking in our Church, and ought we not to be open to the Spirit now, just as the first community of disciples opened themselves to the Spirit and burst out of the upper room in Jerusalem to go out into the whole world to begin to spread the Good News, to do what Jesus had commanded them.

?As God has sent Me, I send you. I mission you to do everything I did.? That is our call. That is what could happen on this Feast of Pentecost if all of us are open to the coming of the Holy Spirit, and we allow that new creation to happen once more.

Break forth into the world. Be the presence of Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

To me, it?s an amazing, marvelous thing that could happen if our whole Church once more opened itself to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. What I hope we can do today as we reflect on these Scriptures, as we reflect on what happened in the early Church, what happened so recently in Czechoslovakia, as we reflect on these things, pray that each of us will experience that coming of the Spirit into our hearts, to make us more committed to living the way of Jesus, to making the message of Jesus known.

And not just all of us as individuals, but our whole Church will undergo a new Pentecost and we will become that living body of Jesus present in the world to transform the world into the reign of God.

Pray that it will happen to each of us. Pray that it will happen to our Church. This is how we are to celebrate this new creation in this Feast of Pentecost.

[This homily was given at St. Agnes Parish in Sawyer, Mich.]

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